

MARK GROTJAHN



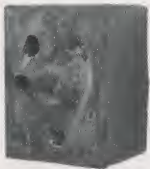
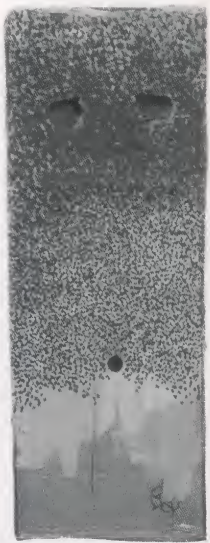
MARK GROTJAHN: THE ART OF THE DREAM

MARK GROTHJAHN / ANTON KERN GALLERY



OPENS THURSDAY, OCTOBER 9, 6-8PM. THROUGH NOVEMBER 15, 2003. ANTON KERN GALLERY 532 W 20TH STREET NY NY 10011 T 212.367.9663 F 212.367.8135

G-ROTTAHH, MARK





HAMMER

Mark Grotjahn: Drawings

January 11 – April 17, 2005

HAMMER PROJECTS

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Libby Lumpkin



Hammer Projects are a series of exhibitions focusing primarily on the work of emerging artists.

Hammer Projects are made possible with support from The Annenberg Foundation, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, and members of the Hammer Circle.

Organized by James Elaine, curator, Hammer Projects

Above: *Untitled (Sign Exchange)*, 1998. Traded signs; ink and pencil on paper.

Left: untitled drawing by artist at age seven, 1975. Marker on card.

Middle, left: *Untitled (colored butterfly white background 6 wings)*, 2004. Color pencil on paper.

Middle, right: *Untitled (colored butterfly white background 10 wings)*, 2004. Color pencil on paper.

Far right: *Untitled (large colored butterfly white background 8 wings)*, 2004. Color pencil on paper.

Front cover: *Mask*, 2004. Acrylic and cardboard on box.

Back cover: *Untitled (large black flower)*, 2004. Pencil on paper.

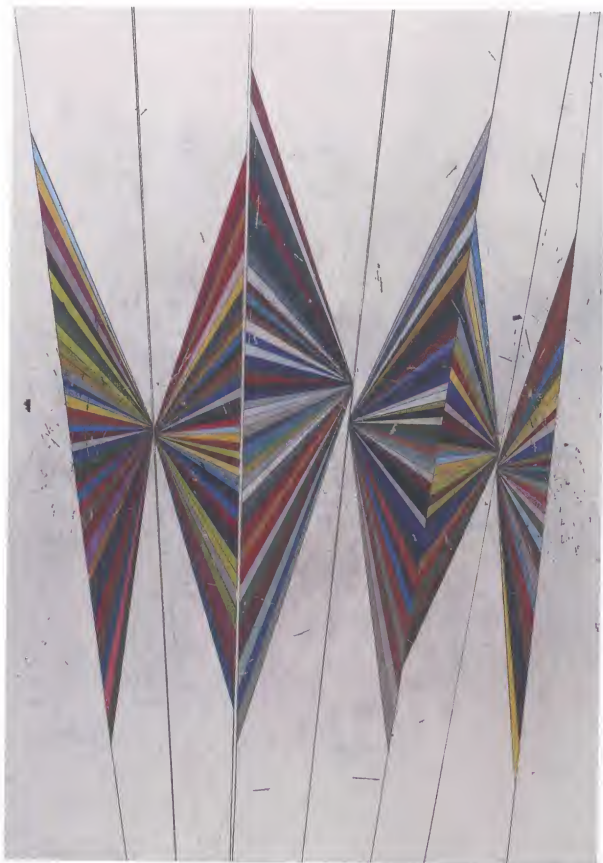
Flap: *Untitled (large colored butterfly white background 10 wings)*, 2004. Color pencil on paper.

All works courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and Anton Kern Gallery, New York. Photos: Joshua White.

When considering Mark Grotjahn's distinctively expressive and mysteriously compelling uses of abstraction, standard rules do not apply. The seven drawings created for his exhibition at the Hammer Museum clearly demonstrate the artist's fluency in various dialects of the common abstract language, resonating with Constructivist and Minimalist tones and with a few refrains in less analytical abstract traditions. Searching for systematic principles with which to anchor Grotjahn's abstractions, however, is not particularly rewarding. Of the variable types of logic that underlie most abstract designs, whether traditional or trendy—aesthetic, symbol, metaphor, rhythm, presence, emotion, religion, digital generation, statistical data, and such—none quite fits.

Note the artist's densely applied pencil marks, which render the planar segments solidly opaque. Given the provocative dissonance between expressive "matter" and analytical "mind," these marks compete with the linear configurations to be the key signifying element. One imagines the artist bearing down on the pencil with earnest, concentrated focus, as if in answer to some urgent necessity. The impasto-like "weightiness" of the marks suggest that that urgent necessity might be to establish a dialogue with the early, objectlike paintings of Jasper Johns and Frank Stella, or possibly with Richard Serra's expressively "weighty" monochrome drawings. But the tedious, almost quixotic nature of the endeavor—forcing a dense impasto from delicate color pencils—leads one to suspect that the motivation originates not in the common culture, but in a more holistic domain that includes lived experience: as a schoolboy, Grotjahn was rewarded for achievements with poker chips meant to be "cashed in" for prizes. The prizes he most often selected were coloring books featuring abstract, mazelike designs, the pages of which the young artist no doubt carefully burnished with a thick impasto of Crayola.

Indeed, Grotjahn's art seems more closely, and purposefully, tied to personal experience and meditative procedures than is common among the generation schooled in analytical practices. In his studio, he keeps an abstract color drawing he produced at age seven. Its highly refined, vaguely Cubo-Primitivist-style composition is impressively similar to the Cubo-Expressionist works Grotjahn produces in parallel to his fully nonfigurative paintings. Many of the Cubo-Expressionist works are exhibited in finished form, but most are completely obscured beneath the opaque surfaces of paintings featuring abstract radiant designs. The perspectival



variant of the radiant motif, which is found in the Butterfly Series drawings, is one to which the artist has returned in paintings and drawings since 1997, with the same regularity and commitment with which Paul Cézanne returned to Mont Sainte-Victoire.

For Grotjahn, however, the process appears to be less about transforming the experience of nature into art, than transforming the experience of art through “natural” internalizing processes. As the pragmatist John Dewey might have it, Grotjahn makes art as a sentient “live creature,” with art, rather than nature, forming the basis of the common culture. The radiant motif in the Butterfly Series drawings morphs according to internal logic, rather than by virtue of external inspiration or analytical system. Compositionally, the motifs are less tied to the rectangular support than those in previous works, and they occupy the field in greater numbers, arranged, according to the artist, purely intuitively. Aligned at slightly skewed angles and closely adjacent to one another, they achieve a newly vital dynamism, animated with an Op-like flutter.

The drawings *Black Flower* and *Black Water*, which are the first of two new series, introduce an abstract motif that appears to be an organic variant of the perspectival motif. The compositions—consisting of densely filled segments radiating from multiple points

in iterative, hand-drawn patterns—are divided roughly into halves or quadrants by thin, geometrical lines. These abstractions seem so familiar, and so profoundly part of American traditions, that it is difficult to accept that nothing quite like them has been seen before. Certainly Grotjahn’s iteration, the density of the pencil marks in the segments, and the faintly gray division lines recall Stella’s early Black Paintings, whose geometrical lines were rendered gray by the paint’s bleed. (In fact, Grotjahn renders his lines with the same black pencil used to impasto the segments. The dissimilar appearance results from the lighter touch.) Precedents for dividing compositions into halves or quadrants, and for making hand-drawn patterns, could be easily listed, but the logic of Grotjahn’s synthetic compositions remains elusive, suggesting that they are powered primarily by an internal motor.

Grotjahn’s freely intuitive and expressive use of abstract idioms previously associated with the denial of subjective attributes, his catholic and uncommonly reverential embrace of abstract styles, and his own earnest, uncritical creativity suggest that the artist ingests the common language of abstraction as one would a tonic elixir: for nourishment and energy. As abstraction sustains the artist, the artist revivifies abstraction, measuring it against

the vicissitudes of daily life and the contingencies of professional practice, in ways unexpectedly sincere and mysteriously personal.

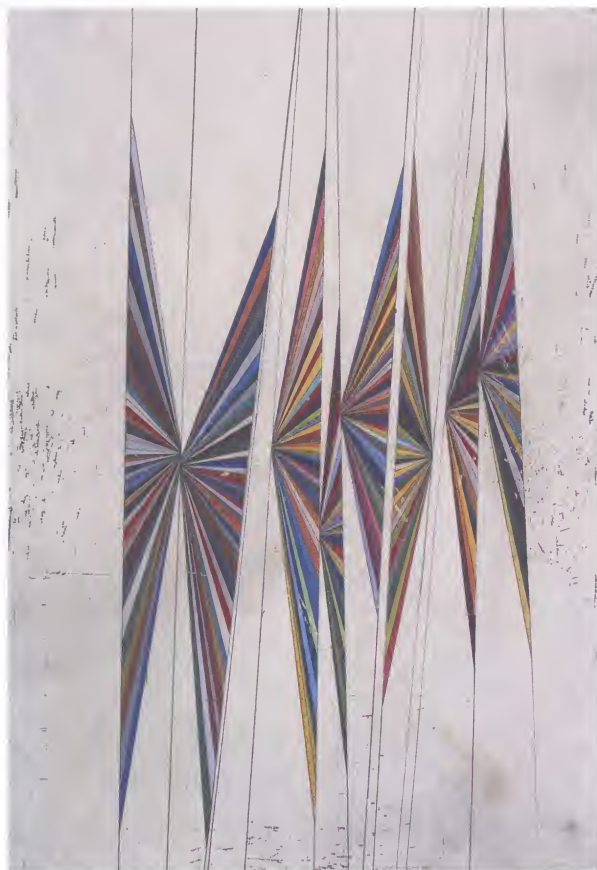
Grotjahn's works suggest that, in a sense, art and life can be not just decompartmentalized, but truly melded, a position as radically transgressive today as analytical abstraction was in its time. Thus, if any progenitor may be siphoned out of the boiling pot, it would be Jay DeFeo, the mystically inclined "beat generation" artist who set the bar for running the internal motor at full throttle. Indeed, DeFeo's own radiant motif first appeared in an enormous, close-up drawing of her eyes, as lines streaming down and outward from the pupils. A mandala-like version of the radiant motif constitutes the thick, crusty surface of her legendary painting *The Rose*, where it obscures the numerous layers of paintings, both abstract and figurative, she laid down over a period of seven years. If, then, in its broad definition, abstraction serves to reveal the unseen, for both DeFeo and Grotjahn, it perversely serves as a material diary of intense meditations whose specific revelations remain as impenetrable as their characteristically opaque surface marks.

Grotjahn, however, does not enter into the same obsessive death dance with art that led DeFeo to an early demise. In fact, the self-imposed rules of procedure that he often employs seem designed to mitigate the potential for slipping into pathological overidentification. The palette of the Butterfly Series drawings, for example, was established by a process both intuitive and externally regulated. In a procedure not unlike systems employed by Sol LeWitt and Alfred Jensen, Grotjahn set aside the required number of color pencils, choosing colors that "hold together" in value and intensity. Turning his eyes away, he selected the pencils blindly, then applied the colors systematically from left to right.

To create his abstract paintings, Grotjahn similarly systematizes application, consistently dragging the brush from edge toward center, working counterclockwise until the Cubo-Expressionist-style painting he has laid down first disappears. Likewise, in the making of *Black Flower* and *Black Water*, the artist progressed counterclockwise and from edge to center. The aberrant markings that appear in open parts of his drawings are the result of a different ritual: he works on smaller drawings placed on top of the paper, allowing his hand to stray off their edges. In this way, he adds a diaristic layer of marks, many of which are completely obscured when the larger drawing is complete.

Thus, Grotjahn's art reads as an allegory less of mystified and frightening dependency than of the kind of quotidian negotiations that take place in daily life. If his abstractions are "about" anything, they are about resuscitating a pragmatic concept of holistic experience and modifying that naturalistic idea to meet the needs of a dedicated contemporary art practice in which emotion and contingency interact with larger structures of personality, and philosophical problems interact with real production.

Libby Lumpkin is an art historian and critic living temporarily in Southern California.



Biography

Mark Grotjahn was born in 1968 in Pasadena, California, and currently lives in Los Angeles. He received his MFA from the University of California, Berkeley, and his BFA from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Recent solo exhibitions include *Mark Grotjahn: El gran burrito* at Boom, Chicago, and shows at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. His work has been included in group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the London Institute Gallery and is on view in the *Fifty-fourth Carnegie International* at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, until March 2005.

Hammer Museum

10899 Wilshire Boulevard Los Angeles, CA 90024
Information: 310-443-7000 www.hammer.ucla.edu

The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center is operated by the University of California, Los Angeles. Occidental Petroleum Corporation has partially endowed the Museum and constructed the Occidental Petroleum Cultural Center Building, which houses the Museum.

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OPENING ACTIVITIES

Thursday, February 16, 2012

Members Walkthrough | 5 p.m.

A members-only gallery walkthrough and conversation with artists Mark Grotjahn and Ian Kiaer led by AAM CEO and Director, Chief Curator, Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson.

Exhibition Reception | 6–8 p.m.

Free and open to the public.

FREE PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Sunday, February 19, 1:30–3:30 p.m.

Take a creative ski break! Create your own lift-ticket design at the Snowmass Treehouse Kids' Adventure Center inspired by 2011–12 lift-ticket artist Mark Grotjahn.

Thursday, March 15, 6 p.m.

Barry Schwabsky, art critic at *The Nation*, explores how the work of Mark Grotjahn engages with the development of abstract painting.

Exhibition on view at the Aspen Art Museum February 17–April 29, 2012.

Admission to the AAM is FREE courtesy of John and Amy Phelan.

This exhibition is organized by the AAM and funded in part by the AAM National Council with additional support provided by Linda and Bob Gersh and Barbara and Michael Gamson. Publication underwritten by Toby Devan Lewis. Exhibition lectures are presented as part of the Questrom Lecture Series and educational outreach programming is made possible by the Questrom Education Fund.

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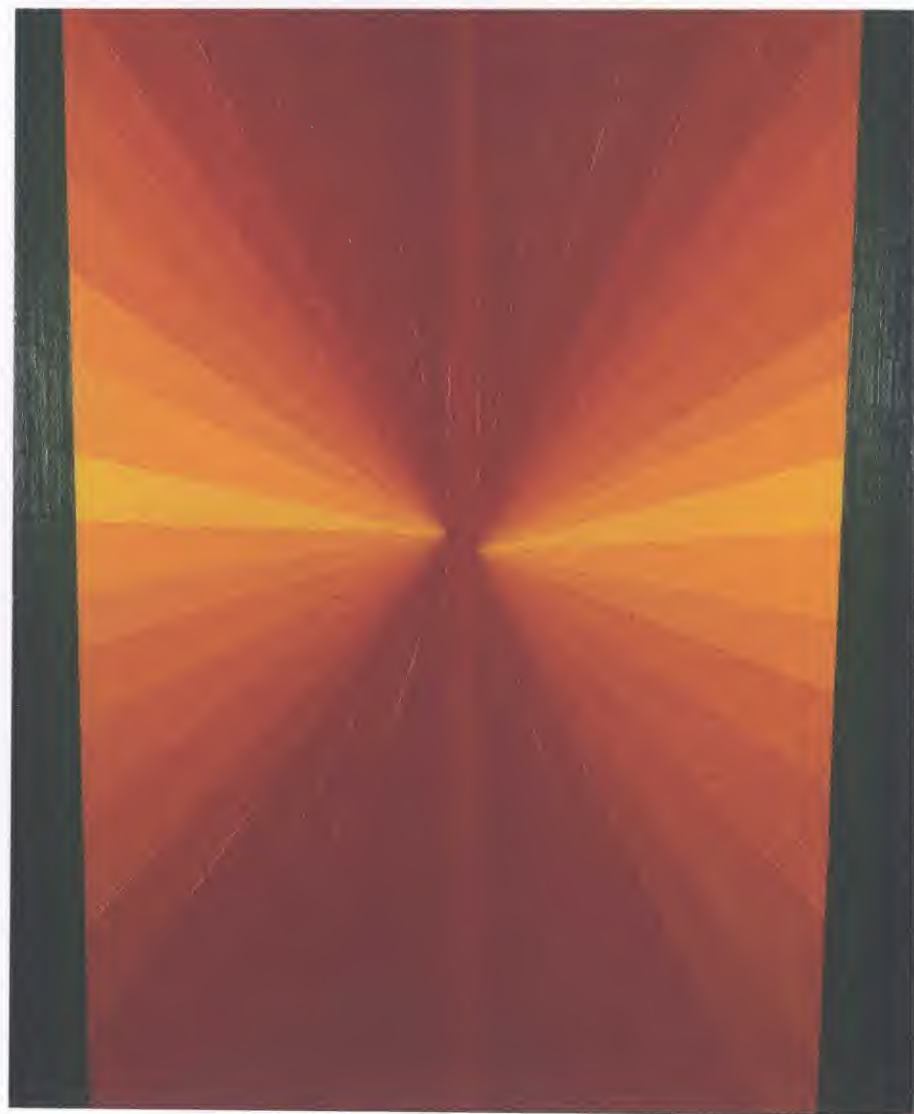
aspenartmuseum.org

Admission to the AAM is FREE courtesy of John and Amy Phelan.

Cover: *Untitled (Face on Palette)*, 2007.
Image courtesy of the artist. Private collection. Photo: Joshua White.

Inside: *Untitled (Tequila Sunrise)*, 2003. Collection of Milton and Sheila Fine. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Adam Reich.





The CEO and Director, Board of Trustees, and National Council
of the Aspen Art Museum cordially invite you to attend:

MARK GROTJAHN

Opening Reception

Thursday, February 16, 2012
6–8 p.m.
Aspen Art Museum